

GLIMPSE OF THE PAST

By Michael Iwinski
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Survivors from an age when cars were loaded with chrome and the roadside gleamed with neon signs continue to dot Green Bay's landscape.

Independent motels — some dating back nearly 60 years — continue to function much the same way they have since the 1950s and 1960s. Minus the vintage automobiles, Green Bay's remaining motels mostly retain their original appearance, and are nearly identical to the classic postcards from yesteryear.

By skimming through 1950s city directories, many of Green Bay motels not only are still around, but have also kept their original names. The Packer City Motel, Sky-lit Motel, Bay Motel and Tower Motel all date back to 1952-1962, and continue to operate well into the 21st century.

After the highway system began to develop in the United States in the first quarter of the 20th century, driving long distances became more common. Unlike many hotels that were generally located in the city center, the motel offered inexpensive lodging near main routes. The Wisconsin Historical Society notes that motels increased in popularity from a business perspective as well, as they were easier to construct and maintain. They note that "motels used exterior ornamentation and gimmicks to attract guests, and were remodeled to appear modern." This is evident in Green Bay's motels simply by reading the back of a postcard from the era. Flashy signs, catchy names and novelties were employed throughout with each new establishment.

Capitalizing on the team that put the city on the map, perhaps the oldest surviving motel in town is the Packer City Motel at 1957 Main Street. Dating to about 1952, it technically was outside of the city limits when first constructed, as the town of Preble and Green Bay had not yet been consolidated. An early postcard refers to its location as: "South East of Green Bay, On Highway 29 and 141," and boasts it was "Northeast Wisconsin's Largest Ultra Modern Motel" with "42 De Luxe Rooms." Mr. and Mrs. Leo P. Braspenick were listed as early — if not the original — proprietors. A bird's-eye view of the establishment gives the impression it existed in a remote location, with nothing but open fields visible in the horizon. Fifty-nine years later, the large green neon sign signaling vacancies and offering food has been replaced, and the white picket fence is now gone. Otherwise, the red brick buildings appear untouched from the outside.

One of the best representations of a 1950s motel can be found in Ashwaubenon. The Sky-lit Motel, at 2120 S. Ashland Ave., was built in 1956. The building is nondescript; however, the large neon sign no doubt has made an impression on thousands of guests and travelers throughout the last half a century. It is characterized by geometric shapes and bright colors. The motel's name is spelled out in stylized lettering on a backlit portion, with "motel" in neon lettering against an orange backdrop. Jutting out of one side is a vertical bar representing the night sky with white stars and ovals. The sign is crowned with a yellow star that once flashed in neon, giving the impression of motion. Until recently, the sign remained in need of restoration, but generally un-



Sky-lit Motel sign photo taken in 2009, prior to the recent paint job that covered the original portion depicting the "night sky." Submitted photo and post cards



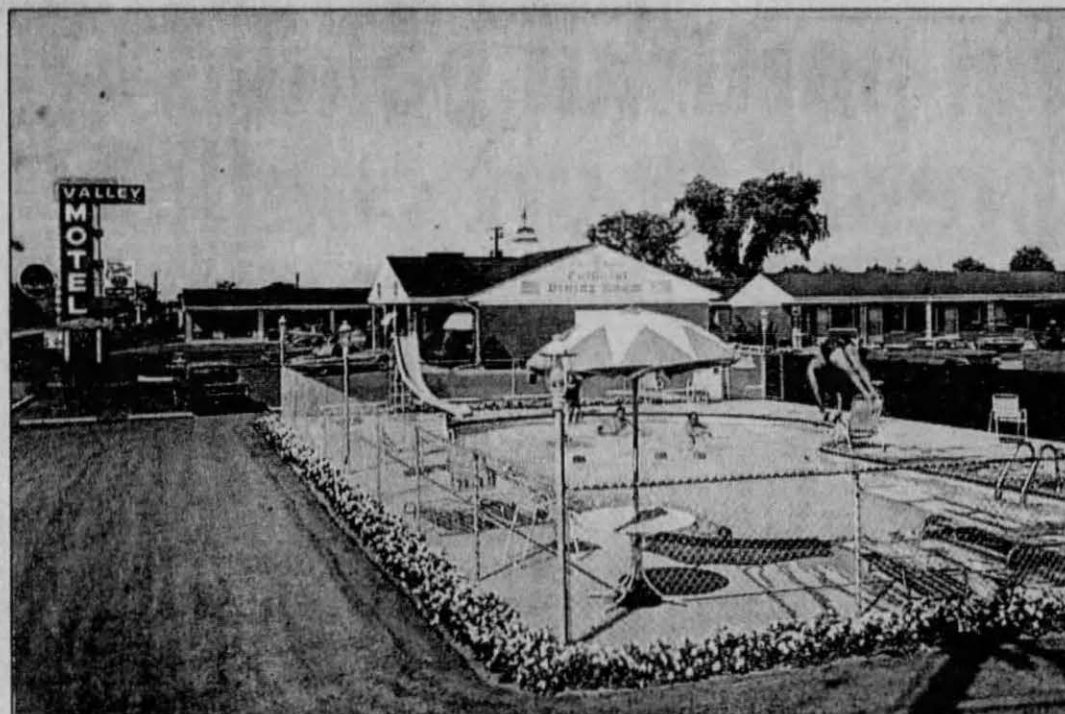
ABOVE: Late 1960s postcard of the Valley Motel.

RIGHT: Classic, early 1960's postcard of the former Valley Motel, which was located on Military Avenue and demolished in the early 2000s.

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touched. Inexplicably, a recent paint job covered the original night sky with a uniform dark blue paint. The earliest listing in a city directory records Lloyd J. Gerondale as the first owner of the establishment, and advertises features such as "Free TV in every room" and "steam heat."

The Bay Motel — also known early on as the Joseph Loch motel — was built circa 1957, and is located on the city's west



Early 1950s postcard of the Packer City Motel, located at 1957 Main Street.

side at 1301 S. Military Ave. Egg-shaped signs spelling the hotel's name in script later were removed and replaced with a modern sign. The hotel was remod-

eled and expanded over the years, including the addition of 24 units in 1961. Now known as Bay Motel and Family Restaurant, it is perhaps more known

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locally as a restaurant today than for lodging.

Another of the west side's other notable motels has since been razed — the Valley Motel at 116 N. Military Ave. A classic postcard from the early 1960s focuses on the facility's swimming pool, encircled with a short chain-link fence and mounds of white flowers; the "Colonial Dining Room" is clearly seen in the background. The building's design was nearly identical to other motels in Green Bay — red brick with a gable roof and white trim. The Valley Motel seemed to use all the gimmicks of the day. An early postcard describes the motel's "Charm — Comfort — Courtesy," with "56 De Luxe New Units — Dining Room; T.V. — Radio — Music — in Every Room." Aside from the swimming pool, the other enticing feature was a "Beautiful color lighted water fountain." The motel was demolished about 2007, and in its place stands a Walgreens.

Around 1962, the Tower Motel was constructed atop a hill at 2625 Humboldt Road on Green Bay's east side. Originally, the motel had a tall vertical sign with each letter of "motel" in neon on rectangles.

Stylistically, it is of the same general construction as the typical motel in town.

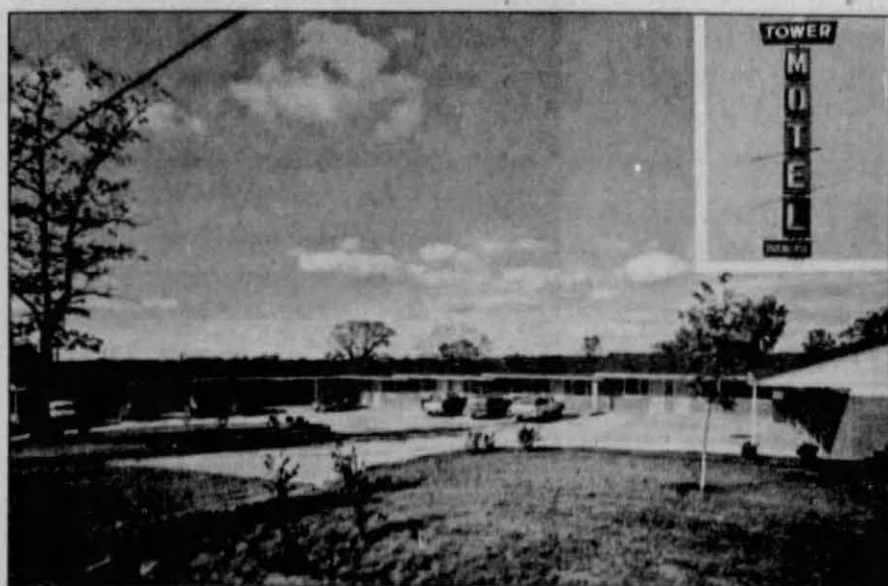
Large corporate chains eventually moved into many areas, replacing many of the independently owned motels. Green Bay seems to have escaped this trend. One chain did expand into the community in the 1960s.

Unlike other area motels, which generally were built on the outskirts of town, the Imperial '400' Motel chain constructed a unit in the middle of downtown at 119 N. Monroe St., circa 1962. The Imperial '400' Motel chain employed a distinct "butterfly sun-flap" roof design that was created by the architectural firm Palmer & Krisel. Originally built in Los Angeles, San Diego and Phoenix, the prototype became so successful the core design was replaced across the country. The chain's logo was a kilt-clad Scotsman, and the slogan, "Aye, royal accommodations at thrifty rates." Eventually, the chain would change hands. The pool would be filled in and the name would become the Village Inn.

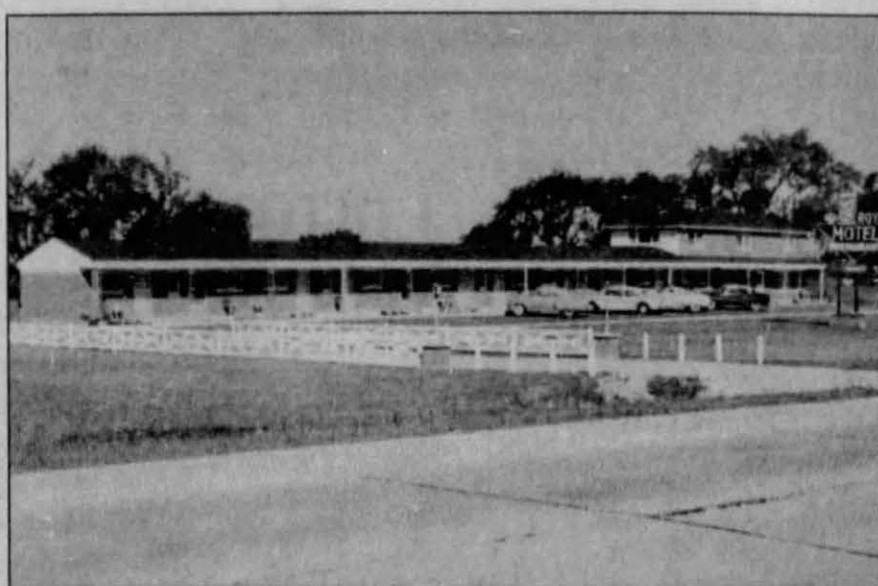
Even though the novelty of air conditioning and TVs in every room faded away years ago, the fact that these establishments continue to serve the traveler much as they did 50 years ago is a quaint reminder of a different time.

Michael Iwinski is chairman of the Green Bay Historic Preservation Commission. Among his sources for this story are the Wisconsin Historical Society (http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/archstories/motels/motels_hotels.asp); Palmer & Krisel and the Imperial '400' Motels: Spreading Good Design to Mid-Century Travelers (<http://socalarchhistory.blogspot.com/2010/03/palmer-krisel-and-imperial-400-motels.html>), postcards and Green Bay city directories.

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Postcard of the Tower Motel, 2625 Humboldt Road, postmarked 1969.



Royal Motel postcard, mid-1950s. This motel was later demolished.



Imperial '400' Motel (currently the Village Inn), located at 119 N. Monroe Ave. Early 1960's postcard.